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SUBJECT: Day of Solidarity Numbers Don't Add Up

11. (SBU) Summary: On November 16, opposition activists hosted the second "Day of Solidarity" with those who have been persecuted by the GOB. While the organizers reported extremely high levels of participation, embassy observations suggest their numbers were inflated. End summary.

12. (U) On November 16, the "Free Belarus" Coalition, including Nikita Sasim, journalist Irina Khalip, and wife of "disappeared" businessman Irina Krasovsky, organized the second "Day of Solidarity." This monthly commemoration event for missing politicians, political prisoners and their families aims to unite Belarusians with those who have been persecuted by the GOB. On the 16th of every month in the lead up to the presidential elections, the organizers ask Belarusians to turn off their lights at home from 8 p.m. to 8:15 p.m. and place a lit candle in their window.

ORGANIZERS REPORTED OVERWHELMING PARTICIPATION

13. (SBU) At an October 27 meeting with Poloff, the organizers predicted some 500,000 people would participate in the November 16 event. This was a five-fold increase from the 100,000 participants the organizers reported for the first Day of Solidarity on October 16. To publicize the event, activists placed stickers on buses, drew graffiti on walls, distributed fliers, sent text messages via mobile phones, and relied on simple word of mouth.

14. (U) The half a million estimation proved too ambitious; on November 17, the organizers reported that 300,000 people participated in the second day of solidarity. They did estimate, however, that 1.5 million people have learned about it worldwide. While they claimed the majority of their support came from the regions in Belarus, organizers also reported citizens from countries all around the world participated in the day of solidarity, especially in Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland and Belgium. Press reports indicate that youth activists in Kiev lit hundreds of candles on Independence Square, and then marched to the Belarusian Embassy to burn more candles and lay flowers.

ACTUAL OBSERVATIONS CONTRADICT REPORTED PARTICIPATION

¶5. (SBU) While the reported numbers of participants in the second day of solidarity were robust, post's observation suggested a much lower level of participation at least in the capital city of Minsk. On November 16, Emboffs wandered around several neighborhoods in Minsk to observe the second day of solidarity. Of the several thousand apartments the officers viewed from the street, only three candle sightings were reported.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) Either the participation in the regions was much greater than in Minsk or the numbers the organizers reported were vastly inflated. While the idea of uniting people in Belarus and around the world in solidarity with those who have been persecuted by the GOB is a commendable form of non-violent protest, it does not appear to have caught on yet among most Belarusians. But from tiny acorns...

KROL